

The Chinese People's Liberation Army In 2020

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I. Introduction — Some Historical Context

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is currently engaged in a period of deliberate and focused reform that began in the early 1990s. The objective, to grossly over simplify, is to become a more professional force and a more operationally capable force.

This in itself is not news. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 the PLA has undergone various intense periods during which it strove to achieve higher levels of modernization, enhanced operational capabilities, and increased levels of professional competence.

What *is* new in this latest attempt is the larger domestic and international context against which military modernization is taking place—and it augurs well for the aspirations of the PLA.

The first three decades of the existence of the PRC were simply not conducive to a program of focused and sustained military modernization due to self-inflicted circumstances at home and developments abroad. The prospects for a sustained program of military modernization during this period were derailed by:

- The debilitating impact of the Korean War on the PLA
- Mao Zedong's purge of key military modernizers such as Peng Dehuai
- An economy devastated by the “Great Leap Forward” and other ill-founded economic policies

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- Over-dependence on Soviet military assistance which ceased abruptly
- The specter of total and nuclear war with those same former allies
- The ideological madness of the Cultural Revolution that worshipped those who were “Red” and reviled those who were “Expert”
- China’s choice for autarky, cutting itself off from the developed world, and
- Leadership instability in the wake of Mao’s death (1976)

Today, by contrast, the PLA enjoys a very different domestic and international context:

- Secure land borders and no prospect of invasion
- A prolonged period of unprecedented peace that began in the mid-1980s
- An especially unprecedented period of economic prosperity that continues
- Relative leadership stability and unity of purpose
- The reconciliation of pragmatism and ideology
- Integration into the larger world on multiple levels, and
- The respectability of technical expertise and professional competence

The PLA, with the blessings of the central leadership, has been taking maximum advantage of this remarkable period in modern Chinese history to retool and transform itself. Two decades from now, if the PLA is successful in much of what it seeks to achieve (by no means a certainty), then historians will likely look back and see the roots of that success in the programs begun in the late 1980s and especially the decade of the 1990s.

This paper begins with a brief section that *speculates* about the general characteristics of the PLA in 2020 (see section II below). The majority of this paper provides an overview of some of the key programs, policies, and reforms currently underway in the PLA that could result in the notional PLA of 2020 actually coming into being.

II. Bottom Lines Up Front — Whither “PLA 2020”?

The exact size, the precise organization, and—most importantly—the real (as opposed to aspirational) operational capabilities of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the year 2020 are impossible at this point to detail with precision. But there are six general characteristics about this constantly evolving defense establishment in the year 2020 that I am willing venture some guesses on.

- First, by 2020, the PLA (which is term that includes all of the services) will certainly be a more professional force in the corporate and institutional sense and a more operationally capable and *sustainable* military force in the war fighting sense than it is today.
- Second, the PLA of 2020 will still likely be a force tooled for sustainable *regional* force projection (sustainability currently open to question); not *global* force projection.
- Third, the PLA of 2020 will still probably be a large organization in terms of numbers—larger than it needs to be or would prefer to be—with most units of uneven quality (in terms of equipment and trained personnel) but with a relatively small core of highly trained and well equipped units that will make the PLA one of the premier regional military forces in Asia.¹
- Fourth, although the PLA is today only at currently at the incipient stages of its road toward joint-ness, by 2020 the “color” of the PLA will likely be much more “purple” than it is today. This implies more capabilities in the maritime and aerospace battle space dimensions and new command and control relationships.

¹ The socio-political challenge to the government in Beijing associated with the demobilization of massive numbers of soldiers is a regime stability issue that is handled with great care. Since 1985 the PLA has downsized by cutting more than 1.5 million troops. Another 200,000-person reduction is underway. The economic burdens on local governments of placing demobilized troops and their families back into the civilian sector is likely the greatest factor that inhibits the PLA from scaling down to a much leaner military—one that can be evenly trained and equipped for excellence across the board.

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- Fifth, by 2020 the PLA will almost certainly have enhanced space-based C4ISR capabilities—certainly for new architectures to enable new command and control relationships, and probably for enhanced battle space awareness.
- Finally, and sixth, while no nation’s military modernization programs have static end-states, by 2020 the leadership of the PLA will aspire to have a military that is:
 - (1) Capable enough to fight and defeat other regional militaries on its periphery, and
 - (2) A military that is credible enough to deter outside military intervention in potential conflicts with regional adversaries on China’s periphery.

III. Aspirations versus Capabilities

The characteristics of “PLA 2020” cited above are derived from long-term analysis of the PLA’s current and impressive reform and modernization efforts, a careful reading of Chinese professional military literature, the statements of key Chinese civilian and military leaders, and a subjective sense of the future geo-strategic environment that Chinese military and civilian strategists foresee for the PRC in the next two decades.

All of the characteristics listed above, then, are where the PLA would *like* to be in 2020. They represent a best assessment of the PLA’s aspirations.

It is not entirely clear, certain, or inevitable that the PLA will be successful. There are a host of formidable systemic problems endemic within the PLA, challenges from within greater Chinese society, and many unknown domestic problems and wild card events in the international environment that could preclude this massive defense establishment from achieving its objectives.

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Yet, in the past few years the PLA has proven that it is a “learning organization” (to borrow from the jargon of the field of Organizational Effectiveness). It understands what is broken, and understands what must be fixed and changed. This in itself is impressive. There is today no greater critic of the PLA than the leadership of the PLA. What is not yet clear is how much “adaptive capacity” this organization has on the ground as opposed to on the blackboards. Those who look at the PLA from afar are likely not going to be in a position to adjudge levels of progress.

IV. Onward To The Future — The “Two Transformations”

The future PLA that the Chinese leadership aspires to field in the next two decades most definitely has its roots in the early 1990s.

To be sure, since the early 1980s, Chinese military analysts had been carefully studying developments in world military affairs and their implications for the PLA. For example, PLA assessments of the lessons of the Falklands War were extensive and those lessons and assessments are recounted even today in a variety of PLA’s professional military literature.

But it was the first Gulf War in particular that had a galvanizing effect upon the PLA—much as the 1973 Arab-Israeli War had upon the U.S. Armed Forces. *Operation Desert Storm* forced the PLA leadership to confront the fact that it was already 20 years behind most developed militaries and would fall even further behind if it did not attempt to enact a serious and long-term reform and modernization effort.

Acting upon its own assessments of the rapidly changing nature of modern warfare in the wake of Desert Storm—and new assessments of China’s changing security situation—Beijing’s military leadership came to the conclusion that the armed forces of China were ill-suited to cope with its future defense-related challenges. Starting in the decade of the 1990s, therefore, the PLA put into motion an ambitious reform and modernization program that continues today.

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In late 1995, at an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission, Jiang Zemin put forth the overarching concept for the reform and modernization program that provided the imprimatur to move forward.

Known as the “Two Transformations,” the program calls for the Chinese armed forces to undergo a metamorphosis:

- From an army preparing to fight local wars under ordinary conditions to an army preparing to fight and win Local Wars Under Modern High-Tech Conditions, and
- From an army based on quantity to an army based on quality.

A corollary that usually accompanies the articulation of the “Two Transformations” is that the PLA must also transform itself from an army that is personnel intensive to an army that is science and technology intensive.

Deceptively simple in its articulation, the call to enable the “Two Transformations” is intended to cut across just about every aspect of professional activity within the Chinese armed forces. Overall, there is simply no roadmap or precedent in the PLA’s past for what China’s military leaders are seeking to achieve for its future. This is transformation with a capital “T.”

The totality of what the PLA leadership hopes to achieve through its reform and modernization program is ambitious on two accounts: scope and scale.

Scope. The scope of reforms that the Chinese defense establishment hopes to achieve cuts across every conceivable facet of activity within the PLA—

- The development of new operational concepts and war fighting techniques;
- The modernization of weapons;
- The accrual and integration of state-of-the-art technologies;

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- Rethinking command-and-control relationships and enabling architectures;
- The rectification of the armaments R&D and procurement system;
- Changes to personnel recruitment, retention, and management;
- New standards for training; the enhancement of the professional military education system;
- Adjustments to administrative procedures; force structure adjustments; and enhancements to the logistics system, to name just a few of the many areas of focus.

Scale. This latest attempt at wholesale reform is also ambitious in terms of scale. The PLA is a massive organization. By its own public statements the PLA today has about 2.5 million personnel under arms—even after about a 1.5-million-man reduction since 1985.

But the scale of what China’s top military leadership hopes to achieve is not measured just in numbers. It is measured as well in terms of the intellectual, corporate professional, and conceptual “leaps” that this massive defense establishment is being asked to make.

In effect, the officers and soldiers of the PLA are being told that business as usual will not suffice, that many of the old paradigms are bankrupt, and that entrenched local interests and parochial equities must be cast aside in order to move the PLA into the 21st century.

V. The Drivers

Two basic types of strategic assessments utilized by many other militaries are driving the PLA’s current efforts at wholesale reform—namely, capabilities-based assessments and contingency-based assessments. Let’s briefly consider each.

A. First, Capabilities-Based Assessment

As mentioned earlier, the PLA’s assessments of a decade’s worth of foreign military operations, especially the U.S. experience, forced its strategic analysts to rethink the most

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likely type of war China might have to fight in the future and the generic capabilities that would be required to fight future wars. This included the emergence of new operational doctrines as well as newly fielded and emerging high-end foreign military technologies.

The PLA describes such future military confrontations as “Local Wars Under Modern, High-tech Conditions.” This type of conflict can be briefly described as having the following characteristics:

- It is fought for limited political objectives.
- It is limited geographic scope. In other words, it is not “total war and nuclear war” (which described the most likely type of war Mao Zedong had told the PLA to prepare to fight).
- It is short in duration but decisive in strategic (political) outcome. A single campaign may decide the entire war.
- It demands a high-intensity operational tempo based on mobility, speed, and deep reach.
- It employs high-lethality, high technology weapons causing high levels of destruction.
- It is logistics-intensive with high resource-consumption rates. Success will be as much a function of combat sustainability as the ability to inflict damage upon the enemy.
- It is information-intensive and critically dependent upon C4ISR and near-total battle space awareness.
- It will entail simultaneous fighting in all of the battle space dimensions, to include outer space and the electro-magnetic spectrum, and it will be fought on non-linear battle lines with highly vulnerable deep rear areas.

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- And, notably, it will be characterized by joint service offensive campaigns.

Even if there were no Taiwan issue to focus PLA attention, one could advance the argument that the PLA would *still* be on the same reform and modernization vector it is on today simply due to the basic requirements that this capabilities-based assessment demands.

But these capabilities-based requirements were, and continue to be, most definitely reinforced by the second type of assessment the PLA has made—their contingency-based assessment. This speaks to Beijing’s analysis of the threats it perceives it might face in the near-term and the future, and the likely conflict scenarios that drive operational planning and out-year modernization requirements. So let us briefly consider the Chinese contingency-based assessment.

B. Contingency-Based Assessment

Taiwan: First and foremost, is the issue of Taiwan—likely the current focus of PLA planning. As long as the PRC refuses to renounce the use of force against Taiwan, the PLA must continue to acquire capabilities and develop operational plans beyond mere demonstrations of force. This contingency is complicated by the assumed prospect of U.S. military intervention.

Japan: China remains distrustful of the future of Japan as regards Tokyo’s aspirations for a larger military role in the region. Distrust has been furred by—

- Enhancements to Japan’s military capabilities,
- The recent forays of the JSDF beyond the home islands in support of the Global War On Terrorism,
- Tokyo’s ties to Taiwan,
- The terms of the US-Japan Revised Guidelines for Defense Cooperation (and the nebulous phrase, “The areas surrounding Japan...”)

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- Japanese support of U.S. research on Ballistic Missile Defense systems.

India: The nuclear issue notwithstanding, India is viewed by the Chinese as a perpetual nemesis that is growing in technological prowess and whose navy, the Chinese believe, has expansive aspirations in the Indian Ocean in the future—astride the SLOCs upon which China will increasingly depend for its imported oil.

The South China Sea: Where China is one of several claimants to islands, atolls, and resources. We are all aware of the South China Sea as a locus of military incidents in the past. (China, Vietnam, the Philippines).

Of note, all of these aforementioned contingencies are maritime and maritime-aerospace focused, and most entail the possibility of confronting a relatively developed or highly developed modern military.

Shift in China's Economic Center of Gravity: After more than 2 decades of “reform & opening up” China's economic center of gravity has shifted from deep in the interior—where it was intended to be protected from a potential Soviet land invasion during the 1960s and 1970s—to the eastern seaboard. From Dalian in the north to Hainan in the south, China's “gold coast” represents the real center of gravity of China's strong suit in potential national strength—its economy. But what this also means is that Beijing today faces, and into the future will continue to face, a littoral and maritime defense problem that it has likely not had to grapple with since the Qing Dynasty. And China's maritime-air defense challenges are the ones the PLA is currently *least* able to address. Consequently, the PLA will probably continue to pay great attention to enhancing its naval and air power—which makes sense as well in the context of the other contingencies that are on its table—especially Taiwan.

VI. The “Three Pillars” of Reform

For the purposes of analytic simplicity, one could parse the PLA’s overarching modernization and reform program into what can be described as the “Three Pillars.” They are:

Pillar I: The development, procurement, acquisition, and fielding of new weapons systems, technologies, and combat capabilities.

Pillar II: The development of new operational concepts and war fighting doctrines for the employment of the new capabilities

Pillar III: The vast array of institutional and systemic reforms necessary to support the first two.

Of the 3 pillars of PLA modernization, it is Pillar I (weapons, systems, and technologies) that receives the lion’s share of analysis and attention. It is also the pillar that gets almost all the domestic and foreign media attention and that plays into domestic politics both in Taipei and in Washington.

Compared to analyses of the other two pillars—doctrine and institutions—studying the PLA weapons acquisitions is much more feasible and analytically satisfying. Once a weapon system is identified there is not a lot of guesswork involved in understanding its inherent capabilities. Moreover, a good deal of data is available in English. China’s foreign military acquisitions reach the public domain sooner or later. Moreover, the Chinese themselves often herald the fielding of new indigenous systems. International arms and technology shows usually have a Chinese presence showcasing Beijing’s latest developments in weapons systems or other military-related technologies.

Additionally, for a variety of reasons, the international media consider new Chinese weapons acquisitions inherently newsworthy events—especially the media in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in some quarters of the US. Therefore, there is no dearth of articles

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about new Chinese acquisitions, and no shortage of highly qualified experts commenting in those articles about the capabilities or implications of the PLA's new aircraft, destroyers, submarines, enhanced missiles, etc. This is not just the case in journals that specialize in international military developments, but in mainstream news weekly's and daily newspapers in the West.

Without question, tracking this first key pillar is critical and necessary work if one hopes to see where the PLA is headed in the near term. However, the weapons systems by themselves will not tell us much about *how* those new capabilities will be employed or *by whom* in the future. There simply is no straight line from the acquisition of a new weapon system to new war fighting capabilities. Therefore, a more holistic approach to assessments of the PLA in the out years is necessary.

Without a firm understanding of the new operational doctrines that are being developed by the PLA to prosecute campaign-level operations, and without the ability to identify and track progress in systemic and institutional reform in the Chinese armed forces, assessments of the PLA are going to be driven solely by the new weapons systems that can be identified. This approach will lead not only to sustaining the widely divergent views that are held on the state of the PLA, but possibly to very incorrect net assessments of where the PLA actually is on the road to achieving the objectives it has set for itself. The PLA of the future, therefore, will be defined as much by the systemic and doctrinal changes it undergoes as the systems it hopes to acquire and field. The remaining sections of this paper will highlight some of the interesting reforms underway today that will shape the PLA of tomorrow. Clearly, this can only be done in broad brush fashion within the constraints of space for this event.

VII. Institutional Reforms — The Heart of the Matter

Institutional reforms of the PLA are among the most public and transparent aspect of the larger reform program underway.

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The PLA's determination to standardize, codify, and enforce procedures has resulted in the promulgation of an unending stream of new defense laws, military regulations, and statutes. Many were objectives set for accomplishment under the 9th Five-Year Plan (1996-2000). Hence, the year 1999 was particularly rich in the issuance of new laws and regulations and I often refer to 1999 as "The Year of Regulations."

Almost all of these new regulations have been publicly announced inasmuch as the PLA has used its own press and the state-controlled media to inform the troops of the new changes and explain the rationale behind them. Consequently, if one has been reading Jiefangjun Bao—the official newspaper of the PLA²—and professional journals of the PLA on a regular basis, most of what has been going on is easily discernible. In other words, it is no secret.

A. Personnel Reforms

The PLA leadership correctly understands that personnel reforms are the cornerstone of its transformation. It is also one of its greater challenges. Consequently, over the past several years, the PLA's personnel system has undergone shifts in several key areas that will build a base today for the war fighters of the future.

- **Officer Accession**

The PLA recognizes that in order to develop officers capable of successfully prosecuting a future Local War Under Modern High-Tech Conditions, it will need to select from a larger, more diverse pool of candidates that are knowledgeable and skilled in a wide variety of areas, including advanced technologies, engineering, and social sciences. In an effort to meet this need, the PLA is:

— Developing a more formal, widespread officer recruitment program at civilian universities across the country, seeking both undergraduates and individuals completing masters and doctoral programs

² Online on the Internet in both Chinese and English.

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- Establishing on-campus officer recruitment offices at institutions of higher education
- Managing a National Defense Scholarship program to recruit young, potential PLA officers before they begin their college studies

- **Changes to the Officer Personnel Management System**

Three notable reforms are underway in this area: (1) increased mandatory training for commanding officers, (2) efforts to stabilize assignments as well as to standardize the qualification criteria for assignments, and (3) setting maximum terms on tours of duty in a given assignment.

- The Active-Service Officers Law (promulgated in December 2000) has increased the frequency of pre-command training. Prior to this change, officers slotted for command were required to undergo training prior to assignment at only three command levels: company, regimental, and army. The new law now requires training prior to command at every level: platoon through military region. Moreover, pre-command training is now required for officers who serve in command-equivalent billets in all four of the PLA's career tracks—combat, political, logistic, and armament—not just those in the combat career track.
- In an effort to ensure that qualified officers fill critical unit billets and that there is a degree of stabilization in those billets, the PLA now has regulations that codify the qualifications an officer must possess to assume different types of field billets. Factors considered include job experience, years of service, education level, school training, and health, in addition to political qualifications. Moreover, to ensure stability in key billets, the PLA has established minimum periods of time that an officer is required to serve in an assignment before being permitted to seek a transfer.
- Balanced against the need to stabilize key billets is the PLA's ongoing desire to ensure that officers do not stay in place too long. Therefore, there are now "maximum terms of peacetime service" in billets after which an officer must rotate.

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This is a break from past practices where officers tended to stay in a billet indefinitely. The rationale for this change was twofold: to preclude corruption and nepotism that sometimes resulted (known as “mountaintop-ism” in the PLA), and to encourage officers to seek a broader range of professional experience.

- **Professional Military Education System (PME)**

The PLA is engaged in an ambitious program to modernize its PME system and correct long-acknowledged weaknesses. This entails:

- The search for economies of scale through the creation of large “comprehensive universities,” plans to disestablish many redundant academies, and the decision to consolidate a good number of military academies
- Increased cooperation between military academies and civilian universities to enrich the curricula and teaching staffs and initiating some degree of officer training and education at civilian institutions.

- **Creating a Professional Corps of Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs)**

The PLA has put into motion a serious attempt to create a professional corps of technically and professionally competent NCOs who will have full military careers. This corps will replace the previous system of voluntary extensions for conscripts and is intended to compensate for the recent decision to decrease the length of mandatory conscript service to 24 months for all of the services.³

- To support this effort, the PLA has promulgated regulations to address perceived weaknesses in its existing NCO system and formulate a consistent, enforceable administration scheme.

³ Prior to the change to the national conscription law in 1999, conscripts for the ground forces served three years, and conscripts for the navy, air force, and strategic rocket forces served four years. Under the new law all conscripts for all services and branches serve only twenty-four months.

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- This has included codifying basic practices such as: assignment and appointment; selection and recruitment; training; education; daily management; evaluation; remuneration and rewards; and retirement.
- Moreover the General Staff Department (GSD) will centrally manage and approve the allocation of NCO billets through a system of quotas based on a prioritization of the needs of key units and organizations.
- While conscripts will likely continue to be large part of the PLA's overall make-up, the incipient NCO program underway augurs the possibility of a small, but increasingly capable core of soldiers, airmen, and sailors that may form the nucleus of the PLA's best equipped and trained units of the future.

B. Force Structure and Command & Control Reforms

Force structure reforms encompass changes size and composition of operational units—driven mostly by adjustments to missions, equipment, and manpower requirements. Command and Control reforms refer to new architectures for the prosecution of campaign-level operations.

- Previously, many of the PLA's force structure reforms at the tactical level were driven by the need to conduct combined-arms positional warfare. More recently (beginning in the late-1990s) the PLA's desire to prosecute joint service mobile warfare appears to be driving force structure changes at the tactical level.
- At the operational level, the PLA continues to work out the details of the command and control and staffing arrangements for standing up “War Zones” (war time operational theaters) as opposed to relying on the traditional peacetime Military Regions to prosecute campaigns.

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— Also at the operational level, new doctrinal thinking in the PLA augurs an enhanced future operational role for the PLA Navy (PLAN), Air Force (PLAAF), and Second Artillery Corps within the PLA's ground-force-dominated military structure.

VIII. Sustainability Reforms — Logistics is the Key

Logistics and combat sustainability is a historically weak link in PLA operations. Consequently, high priority is being accorded to modernizing and improving combat service support functions that comport with new operational concepts. In assessing future operations, sustainability is now considered by the PLA to one of the “four key pillars” upon which campaigns will be decided.

In order to prosecute future Local Wars Under Modern High-Tech Conditions joint logistics, rather than service-focused logistics, is now viewed as essential. Toward this end:

- The PLA is moving toward creating joint logistics departments in the military regions.
- There is discussion of creating a corps of PLA “joint logisticians” akin to Joint Duty Officers (“purple suiters”) in the U.S. military, who are trained to think about logistics in joint, rather than service-specific, terms.
- Anecdotal evidence from the PLA press suggests that peacetime administrative efforts aimed at making certain support functions such as fueling and transportation standardized throughout the PLA, PLAN, and PLAAF has already begun in some Military Regions.
- The PLA apparently expects to consume vast quantities of materiel in any future war. To handle such logistics requirements, the PLA is attempting to restructure its battlefield logistics systems. One of the steps that the PLA has expressed interest in

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implementing includes the creation a more mobile logistics force, rather than relying primarily on fixed depots and supply points. Senior PLA leaders have mentioned the need for “emergency” logistics teams for deployment to the field. In at least a few cases, the PLA has apparently created some small, cross-disciplined logistics teams.

IX. Doctrinal Reform — The Jewel in the Crown?

One of the more significant reform initiatives undertaken by the PLA in the past few years is a sweeping change to its operational doctrine. The rethinking of how it will fight its future wars, how it will employ its future weapons systems, and the new operational concepts that the rising generation of officers are being schooled in at the higher levels of PME likely has the greatest potential to shape the future Chinese armed forces more than any other issue listed thus far.

A. Operational Guidance Adjusted In 1999

In 1999, after years of study and extensive experimentation, the entire body of official doctrinal literature that provided authoritative guidance to the PLA at the operational (campaign) and tactical levels of warfare was reissued. The “First Generation Operations Regulations” dating from the mid-1980s was retired, and an apparently large corpus of materials—operations manuals and regulations—were issued that is collectively referred to as “The New Generation Operations Regulations.”

The degree to which the PLA is looking to its new doctrine to carry it into the future is discerned by the commentary in the PLA press that heralded its issuance in 1999. At the time it was declared that the new operational guidance:

- Conforms with the “Two Transformations” army-building program that focuses on fighting “Local Wars Under Modern High-Tech Conditions”

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- Reflects operational adjustments to the changing nature of warfare, changes in “combat tasks” and “combat conditions,” and are keyed to the Gulf War as well as changes to the military strategies of other major powers since the Gulf War
- Applies to all the services and branches of the greater PLA
- Is based on new “combat theories” and recent “new experiences” in training
- Is aimed at “unifying” and “standardizing” operational thinking across the PLA
- Applies to the “various levels” of combat
- Provides new campaign principles and operational principles while at the same time updating previous principles
- Provides for new campaign command and control “principles” and “mechanisms” for joint campaigns
- Calls for new logistics and maintenance support procedures and addresses issues related to information warfare and electronic counter-measures, air defense, and other measures
- Serves as a guide to training within the major services and among them
- Is geared to “future wars”

In the words (1999) of former PLA Chief of the General Staff Fu Quanyou, the new operational guidance:

- Will be “the foundation of our army’s war fighting training”

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- Will standardize and unify the PLA war fighting thinking
- Will guide the PLA to become a joint force
- Will enhance the C2 procedures of the PLA at all levels of combat and enable the goal of fighting as a joint force

B. What is the Essence of the New Operational Guidance?

Likely the most important construct at the operational level of war to come out of the new operational directives is what known in the PLA as “The Campaign Basic Guiding Concept” that calls for “Integrated Operations and Key Point Strikes.”

“Integrated Operations” speaks to the need to integrate: (1) all services (joint operations to include reserves and militia), (2) fighting in all battle space dimensions (to include the electromagnetic spectrum), (3) all campaign phases to focus on the main operational objective, (4) the newest capabilities to focus on the most important enemy targets, (5) all modes of operations (simultaneous offensive and defensive operations, and front and rear operations), and (6) mobile and static operations.

“Key Point Strikes” is the operational expression of integrated operations. It calls for the concentration of the PLA’s most powerful capabilities to destroy or degrade the enemy’s best capabilities to level the technological playing field at the inception of hostilities, and disrupt the enemy’s campaign before it can achieve operational momentum. Doctrinally, the PLA’s approach rests upon (1) the correct selection of “enemy vital targets” and (2) “key point application of force.” In a change from past doctrine, in which the PLA focused on concentration of forces against weak enemy sectors, the new doctrine calls for the PLA to concentrate its best *capabilities* against the vital capabilities that most enable the enemy to prosecute its campaign. In other words, the PLA has shifted to a new concept of what constitutes the enemy’s operational center of gravity. This includes the

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enemy's C4ISR architectures, its most lethal weapons systems, and its combat sustainment capabilities.

In sum, emerging PLA doctrine has shifted from a traditional emphasis of "campaigns of annihilation" (a traditional PLA expression) that focused on force-on-force attrition, to campaigns of paralysis (author's assessment) in which offensive and preemptive strikes at the operational level of war deny the technologically superior (and technologically dependant) enemy the ability to conduct its campaign. Disrupting the enemy's campaign is acceptable if defeating the enemy's campaign head-on is not possible.

X. Concluding Comments

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the shape of "PLA 2020" has its roots in the mid-1990s. The programs that have been underway for the past few years are remarkable in their scale and scope. Those who appreciate the difficulties in moving large defense establishments along new paths cannot help but be absolutely amazed at the ambitious nature of the efforts that are being made.

Clearly the PLA will find a need to readjust its programs as circumstances in world military developments change. Otherwise it will find that it spent the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st Century preparing to fight the wars of the last century once again.

And as mentioned earlier, there is no guarantee that all of the PLA's aspirations will bear fruit. There are incalculable and unknowable problems that they will face along the road to transformation. And it will take time and it will take constant infusions of money. It will especially take time. It is always worth pointing out that it took the US military from the mid-1970s to 1990 to be able to fight Desert Storm.

But the PLA is a learning organization and it is on the right path. While it would be a mistake to overestimate the ability of the PLA to achieve all of its aspirations in the near-term, it would be equally mistaken to dismiss what is going on.